

# About the Feathered Folk



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Temple

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*THE QUIET HOUR SERIES.*

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ABOUT THE  
FEATHERED FOLK.

By CRONA TEMPLE,

AUTHOR OF

"GRIFFINHOOF," "WITH HOOKS OF STEEL," ETC.

""Tis always morning somewhere: and above  
The waking continents from shore to shore  
Somewhere the birds are singing evermore."

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U. C. BERKELEY

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## ABOUT THE FEATHERED FOLK.

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### CHAPTER I.

#### THE HOMELESS BIRD, AND THE BIRD THAT DOES NOT FORGET.

**D**EEP in the bosom of the downs, almost hidden by steep hills, and those giant trees that grow in the south country, there is a certain farm.

A lane leads to it, and past it; but traffic mostly turns in at the farm gates, and it is only but very rarely that wheels or footsteps make a further journey.

So the road beyond the farm is

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a grassy track, where foxgloves and harebells and tufts of fern are ranged in long lines of loveliness. And so peaceful and solitary can it be, that Hannah Hatherly once found a lark's nest there, in an old rut, the half-fledged little larklings not a whit disturbed by such few folk as passed that way.

In January and February the frost builds fairy bridges across the ruts, and there is sometimes a glittering rime upon the spiders' webs amongst the briars; sometimes gleams of russet and glory of scarlet where beech-leaves have been swept together into a hollow, or little knobs of fungus grow sturdily against a decaying bough. A robin hops leisurely along at these times on his way to the window-sill of the farm parlour, or a blackbird flies swiftly over the hawthorns, his beak open and his crop full of berries.

In March and April the whole beautiful world is astir : shrew-mice poke their slender noses between the young grasses ; periwinkles shine, blue as the sea, upon the bank among the fallen fir-needles ; the sound of lambs bleating, of the woodman's axe in the oak-copse, of the call of the plough-boy to his team, come every minute. The pigeons whirl and flutter in the sky ; the farm dog lies lazy at his kennel door ; and the cocks and hens scuttle and clatter after pretty Hannah Hatherly as she carries their scoop of corn in her rosy arms to that spot on the further side of the pond, where neatness ordains they should eat it.

The robin and the thrush, the shrew-mouse and the rest of the wild things—not to mention Hannah and her cocks and hens—have known the farm all their lives. Indeed, they scarcely know anything

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in all the wide world beyond the farm and the lane and the quiet dreamy life of this sweet country side.

But in April come two travelled creatures—the Homeless Bird, and the Bird that does not forget.

No fanciful names are these, but just an expression of the simple truth concerning the Cuckoo and the Swallow.

The scent and the sweetness of the spring has lured them northwards; or, perhaps, it is our lengthening light—for the shortness of the winter's day is gloriously made up to us by the evenings and mornings, which linger and open as soon as the middle of March is bygone; and long daylight means long working and feeding hours to insect-eating birds.

Very familiar these two looked and sounded to Hannah Hatherly as she stood, spell-bound, in the

lane. The Cuckoo flew low and straight, his long tail steadyng his flight, and balancing him upon the bough of beech where he lit, and cried again and again his “cuckoo—cuckoo” call.

Hannah laughed as she heard, and as she noted the fact of her face being turned north-eastwards as she stood.

“London ! ’Tis to London I’m going ! ” she said, under her breath, with a sense of shy and secret delight. “London lies out there. And one travels the path one is facing for, when the first spring Cuckoo is heard.”

That is an old south-country superstition, you must know. Perhaps, as Hannah’s sweetheart had work in London, and had written, bidding her be ready when he came to fetch his wife to his flourishing home, that journey Londonwards might come true, and the Cuckoo-

prophecy be verified, ere the year ran out. Such things do happen now and then !

The Swallow came wheeling and swinging through the air, the sunlight flashing on his burnished wings—those beautiful wings, that might be made of steel and air, so strong and light are they ! His mate swept with him in rapid career, their twittering notes falling in a joyous patter of sound, and ceasing suddenly, as they dashed together under the eaves of the cart-shed.

Hannah knew what they sought there.

Last year's nest yet hung against the angle of the rafters ; perhaps a bit cracked and dusty, but a drier and wholly more comfortable nest than any newly built one could prove. Just a little fresh lining, just a little patching and shaping, and there it would be, cosy and

staunch, ready to rear another brave brood.

And there would be the old familiar feeling about it! The same syringa bush grew at the corner; the same poplar tree flung its flickering shadow over the yard; the same great brown horses stamped about the stones; the same blue and yellow waggons stood back in the shelter; even the same hank of cord hung on a peg behind the door.

And so, with a gladness shown forth by little notes of broken song, by much fluttering of feathers, and glances of bright eyes, the Swallows settled themselves once more in their English home.

If they had a feeling of pity for the Cuckoo, out there on the beech-tree, their sympathy was wasted; for the Homeless Bird feels no sort of yearning for the delights to them so dear.

He sits and sings in his own monotonous way, echoing his call as he flits from hedgerow to copse, happy enough in his own *débonnaire* fashion. And people pause and listen and smile ; they love that note. It comes as a veritable bit of spring-time ; and for most folks pleasant memories and budding hopes are gathered about the spring.

Cuckoos and Swallows—the very sight and sound of them is welcome as the flowers.

\*       \*       \*       \*

It is always easy to comprehend what Swallows are about. The swift, fearless things, secure and confident, make no attempt to elude observation. They literally share the roof-tree of a man's house ; they claim their place in the population of the village street ; they come bustling into the very centres of human life and interests.

But the ways of the Homeless

Birds are mysterious. Cuckoos are shy of taking humans into their confidence. It is only little by little that we have found out anything of their habits, their odd family arrangements, their goings and doings and comings.

It is the male bird who repeats that constant song. His mate is busy with affairs of her own.

She flies to and fro, peering and spying into the hedges and banks, watching narrowly the progress of the nests that are being built there. She stares at the hedge-sparrow's nest in the blackthorn bush ; she flies low over the wagtail's softly-lined corner in the stonework of the dyke ; she visits again and again the robin's beautifully woven nest in the gnarled root of the alder-tree. They might, any one of them, or all of them, be fitting places in which to put her children out to nurse.

Wisely she judges and chooses.

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Goldfinches would kill a baby Cuckoo in a week by stuffing it with food unfitted for its digestion. Starlings would choke it by some ponderous dainty no well-bred *scansores* (which is the family name of Cuckoos) could endure. But pied-wagtails and pipits and robins are exactly fitted to be foster-fathers and mothers to the nurslings which mistress Cuckoo intends throwing upon the cold world's charity.

When her eggs are laid (upon the bare ground, as she has no soft and cunning cradle prepared for them by herself) she lifts them in her bill — they are extremely small, these eggs, compared with the size of the bird—and deposits them in the selected nests. And tenderly the poor little woodland birds accept them as their own.

The egg is about the size of a skylark's: the creature that is hatched from it must appear

gigantic to the foster-parents. Its appetite is gigantic too; and as for its manners—like the South Sea Islanders, it “has none.” It is a pathetic thing to see the gentle little anxious pair toiling hour by hour, and day by day, to satisfy the great gaping throat that always comes the uppermost in their nest.

And after a while the other little throats, one by one, disappear. The intruder has murdered the nestlings, and his ugly body—a mere heaving lump of sprouting feathers—is sprawling itself over the nest. Even then the little parents do not fail in their loving tendance. They toil eagerly on, and watch and brood and hover round the creature that so shamefully abuses their kindness.

We human beings speak glibly enough about “instinct.” But it is a puzzling subject. Even the sagest naturalists confess they know

but little about it. Nowhere does it show more curiously than in the habits of the Cuckoo.

This extremely odd way of providing for their young must have some wise reason in it, although it is hidden, as yet, from our eyes. And the murdering part of the affair, outrageous as it appears, may not be altogether wrong; for the callow Cuckoo has a strange depression on its back, apparently designed for the express purpose of enabling it to shovel its foster-brothers and sisters overboard. The creature is restless and uneasy until it has managed to oust them every one, and get the whole place to itself. Then it rests quiet, and eats and dozes and grows; and the hollow on its back fills up, and it is shaped much as are other young birds who have had no murdering to do.

Later on in its life comes another

wonderful exercise of "instinct." It has never seen its real parents; it can have had no sort of teaching from them in the way in which it must go. A solitary, untrained being it is from the very manner of its rearing—untrained, that is, in the habits and plans of Cuckoos.

And yet, when the time comes, it obeys the mysterious law that rules its nature, and, untaught, unguided, flies southward, over the seas and plains that lie between its birth-place and the land whither it must go.

If the Swallows had minds whereabouts to marvel, they would wonder at that! They take infinite pains to teach and train their own darling brood, even as they were themselves trained by their parents before them. And in the autumn they gather the giddy ones, and keep a bright watch upon them, and make their migration in huge flocks. No

chance of the youngest and least sensible Swallow being lost for lack of guidance.

All the world knows when the Swallows go, and how they go. Hannah Hatherly watched them last year, when, in the earliest gleam of the dawn, they rose in hundreds from the big barn roofs and took their southward way. All the world misses them, and wishes them a safe return.

But who ever saw the Cuckoo start?

The old birds leave England in August; but the younger ones cannot be ready then for so long a flight. They go upon their lonely way, flying singly along the track where their kindred have gone; and in the far-off southern clime they "fore-gather" with the unknown relations whom they have never seen.

How do they recognize their

own? How do they find mates? Why do they doom their own offspring to the fate that must at best be sad and cheerless?

These questionings come from our point of view, of course. I don't suppose the Cuckoo is really less happy than are other birds; but we cannot help judging by our own standards, and must always patch human ideas on to the creatures' experiences.

We love the Swallows for their friendly trust, for their care of their young ones, for their love for their old home. And we cannot withhold a righteous disapproval of some of the Cuckoo's ugly ways. [For we call them ugly—being too ignorant, even the wisest of us, to understand the needs-be and the reason in the puzzles of the world.]

As the dear old sound of the Cuckoo-call comes down the fresh and fragrant air, as the bright wings

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of the Swallows flash past us in the sunshine, we must—unless our heart be very dead and stupid—bless God for the pleasure they give to our ears and to our eyes—those free, wild, beautiful birds who come with the spring-time and the flowers.

## CHAPTER II.

## GOLDEN EAGLES.

**F**AM writing in Scotland, “where Eagles are still common,” as a book written by a member of the British Ornithologist’s Union says. If not exactly “common,” in the usual sense of the term, Eagles are still to be seen in the Hebrides, in the wilds of Skye, and also in those Perthshire glens where Rhoderic Dhu gained his bonnet-plume long ago. Even here where I am abiding, close to the “bonny green banks of Loch Lomond,” I have met with one, at least.

Two years since I was helping a

dear and aged lady down the steps of our kirk door. Her carriage, a hired fly, was waiting for her; but the driver, one of the great clan of Campbell, remained perched on his box, while in hurried tones he begged me to act footman, and hand the lady in. A little surprised at his manner, I did so, and the carriage rumbled away; and I forgot all about Campbell's queerness—it was but a slight matter, after all.

I met the fly before I reached home, as it was returning after having set down its fare. The man drew up.

“I’m begging your pardon, mem,” he said. “I couldn’t well leave the box, ye see, for I’ve got just an Eagle here!”

An Eagle! Had our trusty and only flyman gone crazy this Sabbath morning?

“Aye, mem; just that. And

knowing ye're so interested in the creatures and the birds, I made bold to tell you. I didn't inform the old lady for fear she'd be frightened."

"But *where* is the Eagle?"

"Just here, mem; behind my own heels, wrappit in the horse-rug. I'm taking him home to look to him. He's wounded, I surmise."

I got into the cab: it was an open one, and Campbell and I could converse quite comfortably.

"Drive on to your house," I said, "and tell me all about this as you go."

So Campbell began to explain. "This morning when you were all in the kirk, I was up to the hill. Way-off by the burn, just below the trees, I noticed something stirring in the brackens. Thinking 'twas perhaps a dog, I flung a stone, and shooed it off, for it could be after no good there with game

about. But 'twas ne'er a dog ! I saw the bright eye, the lifted beak of a big bird—a hawk, maybe ; but a hawk tremenjous big, and if 'tis not an Eagle I'm a thick-head!"

"And you caught it?"

"I flung the horse-rug over it, mem. I'd the cloth with me to gie it a bit drying after the shower, and I flung it with a twist o' me arm over the brackens and the bird, and rolled all together ; and as the kirk was near on scaling" (*i.e.* the congregation near to coming out), "I tucked the bundle under the driving seat, put the horse to, drove home my fare, and now I'm just about to give the creature an examination."

Five minutes more and we were standing in Campbell's shed, with the bundle between us, gingerly uncovering a corner or two. The bird rustled about a bit, but showed

no sort of fight; and presently, waxing bolder, we removed the rug entirely, and there, among the handfuls of crushed fern, was certainly an eagle—a Golden Eagle in the rich plumage of late summer.

Its glorious eyes glanced at us with not a shade of fear. It extended its enormous wings as if to fly, but seeing the shed roof over it, and perhaps overcome by weakness and suffering, it folded them again, and lowered its noble head with a gesture that was almost human in its despair.

Then we saw that attached to its right leg was an iron trap and a fragment of rusted chain. The cruel teeth had divided two of the claws, and they hung but by the sinews still clenched in the trap—a fearful load for the bird to bear. The wound had healed, and the sinews were dry and shrunken, showing it was long since the thing had happened.

And in all that time hunger and pain must have torn at the Eagle's very life. It could, certainly, fly slowly through the blue air: it could reach the mountain peaks, where it must have lain panting in the sun, suffering dumbly day by day. It could find water to quench its thirst; but food—the prey which Nature designed for its needs—must have been an impossible quest for those weakened and weighted wings.

Campbell's clasp-knife was out in a moment, the dry sinews were divided, and the horrid iron thing fell to the ground. Then we considered how to feed the bird. Campbell's mother, a kindly Highland woman, gladly gave up the uncooked shoulder of mutton, which was to have served for "the week's end," when the Sabbath roast leg should all be consumed. A shoulder of mutton makes a respectable meal

for two or three hungry men, but the eagle managed to consume every scrap of it at one sitting !

It was revolting to me to see it tear at the food, its overmastering hunger rendering it quite oblivious of curious onlookers. But Mrs. Campbell regarded its performance with great admiration. "My heart ! it *can* eat !" she cried once or twice ; while her son silently weighed the possible chances of gain against the actual loss of that shoulder of mutton.

It was a day or two before I saw the Eagle again.

Campbell was at home, and delighted to exhibit his prize. Three or four people were with me, for the fame of the capture had spread ; and Campbell stepped off to the shed, bidding us wait where we were, as "the big bird was as tame as a door-side goose ! "

We were all a little startled when

he reappeared, carrying the Eagle in his arms, as one might carry a baby ; and he set the creature down on an upturned washing-tub that his old mother had left near by, and passed a caressing hand proudly over the splendid bronze-and-purple sheen of its feathers.

The bird shook out its mighty wings, and moved its graceful neck, but it never offered to fly. Its eyes followed Campbell wherever he went with a devotion curious and pretty to see.

“ It loves me,” the man said. “ Belike it knows that but for the meeting in the ferns it would be dead by now, and it’s grateful. Puir beastie ! Ye’ll never be hungry mair ; that I’ll promise ye ! ”

And it never has been. For it was sold for five bright sovereigns to a fishmonger in Glasgow, and there in the shop it lives in a handsome wooden cage, greatly

admired by customers and visitors; lavishly fed and abundantly petted by its master.

I suppose it was those weeks of torture that broke its spirit. It is gentle now to a degree; and whenever Campbell the cabman comes to see it—which he does as often as his business may take him to Glasgow—the bird turns to his call as tamely as a pet canary.

And yet it is pathetic to see it in the fishmonger's shop, and sorrowful—any one who knows anything about the nature of Eagles. Its glorious eyes rest upon the ignoble details of a dingy town, instead of piercing the broad blue distances of the mountains, lakes, and seas. This bird, the very type of royal strength and freedom, is a sort of live advertisement to a tradesman's wares.

\* \* \* \* \*

Thousands of years ago the

ancients chose the Eagle as their emblem of swiftness and of fortitude. Those ancient poets, Job, King David, and Isaiah, wrote of it. Cyrus the Persian bore its effigy on a spear-head as a standard. The Romans carried it, modelled in silver and in gold, at the head of their victorious legions over the known world. To this day men regard it with an almost superstitious feeling.

And those who have seen it soaring on the wind, or perched like a monarch on some granite crag, never forget the grandeur of the sight. Perhaps a lion stalking the desert is the only other wild creature about which such romance and reverence linger.

They tell me that here in Scotland Eagles are to be "protected"—that is, that gamekeepers will no longer shoot every one that they can get near. People are at last finding out

that it is a dangerous thing to upset the balance which Nature has poised so nicely in her wise hands; and sportsmen are beginning to think that Eagles do more good than harm on the hillsides and the moors.

Shepherds are not quite so sure about the matter. They care, you see, for little besides the welfare of their flocks; and it cannot be denied that a great deal of harm is done amongst the lambs; the enormous strength of an Eagle's claws and thighs making little of the weight of even a half-grown sheep.

A pair of these birds, living on Mount Hecla, in the Isle of Uist, flew almost daily to Skye for a lamb all the time they were rearing their eaglets. The distance is twenty-five or twenty-six miles. The Uist shepherds declared that the cunning birds, fearing vengeance if they

behaved ill at home, decided to spare the flocks of their neighbours and do their plundering at a distance. And it is difficult to see what other reason they could have had for bringing their prey from afar.

An acquaintance of mine vouches for the positive truth of the following curious story :—

On a hill in Caithness, an Eagle was devouring the carcase of a blue-hare that it had killed, when a fox sprang out of the heather, and seizing the bird by the wing, tried to rob it of its prey. By vigorously fighting with its claws the Eagle managed to free its wing; then the fox dashed at its breast, and fastened its sharp teeth deep in the flesh of the bird. The great wings beat, and those tremendous talons struck out in vain. The fox held on. Then the bird rose into the air, and with the fox hanging to its breast it mounted to a great height,

uttering its sharp yelping cry of pain and fear. The fox must also have felt deadly alarm. However experienced a fox as he might be, he had never been up in the clouds before! He let go, at length, fell headlong, and was killed there on the heather beside the blue-hare. The bird, evidently greatly hurt, and faint from loss of blood, flew off, keeping a straight course, in spite of its weakness, until it was lost to sight in the dim distance.

A keeper in the Island of Mull told me he has more than once seen Eagles teaching their young ones to catch prey by dashing into a covey of grouse or ptarmigan, never killing one themselves, but frightening them so effectually that one or two fell as easy prizes to the awkward young eaglets.

A letter from Mr. C. McVean is worth quoting here. I began by telling you my own experience; I

shall finish with the experience of others. Mr. McVean says—

“ My Eagle I have named ‘Roneval,’ after the hill in South Uist, where he was hatched. He is a very fine bird, and is not kept in confinement; he sometimes startles strangers visiting me by swooping past the windows. I have had him now for four years, and he is allowed to go where he will. He is not fond of wandering far, and will always come at the call of the kitchen-maid, who feeds him, and for whom he has the greatest affection. He has a particular aversion to small boys, and always takes an opportunity of flying at one going near him. The only thing he is *afraid* of is a pig; and the grunt of a pig is quite enough to make him beat a retreat, even if the pig be out of sight. Once a visitor from London touched him with the point of a light umbrella, a familiarity which so

offended Roneval's majesty that he seized and smashed the stick, tearing the silk to tatters, the owner of the umbrella scurrying off in affrighted dismay. Usually, however, he is affable enough, and does no more mischief than occasionally killing a hen or two if his own dinner is not served up punctually; and this, I take it, is great forbearance, considering that he actually lives at large in the poultry yard."

This is proof enough that kindness can tame even an Eagle's ferocity, and that the love of its adopted home can win it from the savage delights of the cliffs and corries where it was born.

The outstretched wings of the King of Birds have been measured eight feet in spread. Its beak and talons are brilliant yellow; but it is not from them, but from its plumage it has gained its name of "golden." The feathers of the back and wings

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are of a deep umber-brown, glossed with brilliant purple reflections. The feathers of the neck and head are narrow and pointed, of an orange-brown hue, and when the sun strikes them aslant they are indeed like gold.

## CHAPTER III.

A BROWN GOWN, AND A JEWELLED  
ROBE.

“ Said Robin bold to Jenny Wren —  
 ‘ If you will but be mine,  
 You shall dine off cherry-pie, my dear,  
 And drink red-currant wine.  
 I’ll dress you like a goldfinch,  
 Or like a peacock gay ;  
 So I’m sure you’ll have me, Jenny ;  
 Make haste and name the day.’  
 ‘ Cherry-pie is very good,’ she said,  
 ‘ And so is currant wine ;  
 But I will wear my plain brown gown,  
 And never go too fine.’ ”

**V**ARIATIONS of the old rhyme have been sung by generations of English children, and linger in the memories of older folk ; and a friendly feeling

follows the familiar “downy-browny” birds, as they come flitting through the hedges, or hopping about our doors. Cock Robin is always “bold” to us, and we look for him, and pet him, and admire him, reckoning him as much a part of homely winters as are the holly leaves themselves.

Jenny Wren has nothing to do with him in reality; it is only in song and in our fancy that her fortunes are linked with his. But we love her almost as much, and think that her shy, retiring ways greatly befit so tiny and dainty a creature; and if the praise we give to her modest dress be quite misplaced, it is not the less sincere.

That Brown Gown of hers is a most wonderful and perfect garment; and the absence of colouring upon it makes it all the more exquisitely fitted for her needs. She lives amongst the hedge-stems, the

roots and gnarled boughs of the copse ; she flits along the mossy banks, where the last year's leaves lie in nooks and ridges, leaves which are now just of the same tints as her round little body. Her insignificance is her protection ; those beautifully-marked and rippled feathers of hers match and blend with the colours of the places which she loves.

The Brown Gown is in itself worth a few minutes' consideration. Few of us pause to give thought to such common and light things as mere feathers. And yet, if any man could rightly understand the whole truth about one single feather, he would be wiser than was King Solomon.

My dictionary explains the nature of feathers as being "a complicated modification of the tegumentary system forming the external covering or plumage of birds, and peculiar to this class of animals."

But a simpler way of looking at them will content most people. Let us borrow two feathers from Jenny's Brown Gown, and see what they can tell us.

This stiff one is from the wing ; it has come from near the end of the pinion, as one can tell from its structure. The feathers of a bird's wing are divided into three groups, according to the three wing-bones upon which they are placed. The stiffest and strongest grow on the tip of the wings, for in flight these have the hardest work to do, and must necessarily cover more distance, and move more quickly than the softer, more yielding ones which grow upon that part of the wing which is close to the bird's body.

The wing itself is hard and stiff along its forward edge, soft and yielding along the posterior margin. It is formed to strike and cut the air in flight, and also to allow the

*beaten air to escape easily*, as the body of the bird is forced onwards.

Each quill-feather follows the exact same plan. Its forward edge is hard and strong, the other curved and fluffy; and as the feathers at the outer extremity of the wing have the most weight to bear, and the most force to exert, they are the stiffest and the strongest of all.

The delicate surface of the feather is like a beautifully-woven web. Press the tip of your finger against it, and see how elastic it is; soft and silky as the finest triumph of the weaver's art. And yet it is *not* woven, but merely hooked together by tiny filaments, technically called barbules. There are two sets of these upon every one of the vanes or barbs, which project from the quill; one set is curved upward, the other downward, and they hold so tightly one into another as to form a compact and close surface.

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It is this arrangement that makes Jenny's "gown" so smooth. Under the feathers there are minute tufts of down, filling up every crevice. It is this that makes Jenny's "gown" so warm. And the whole covering is adapted to every movement of the quick little body it clothes.

Long feathers grow where the limbs are prominent, short ones where it is only needful to clothe and protect. And each and all grow in curiously separated plantations, as it were—ordered exactly so as to interfere in the least possible degree with the bird's freedom of motion. That Brown Gown is as convenient as it is beautiful, and in it Jenny flits from bush to bush about her own business — which, during the spring and summer, is a very important business indeed.

She rears two broods a year, and her children generally number ten or twelve. Ten or twelve little

ones, all clamouring for food at the same time, must be a bewilderingly troublesome possession! Her mate helps her manfully, and together they make raids upon insects and worms, and such other dainties, flying backwards and forwards to the nest, which they built with such care and love so dearly.

A Wren's nest is really one of the prettiest things one can find in a day's march. It is often tucked under the sods of a turf-topped wall, or under the thatch of a shed; sometimes it is pushed away beneath the gnarled roots of a tree, or against a stone in a mossy bank. Always it is placed where it will be sheltered from wind and rain. Then it is domed above, and furnished with a tiny door on the sunny side, and decked about with bits of moss and dead leaves and twigs and lichens, until even the sharpest human eyes might take it for nothing more than

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a heap of forest litter swept into a corner by the breeze.

Inside it is lined with finest feathers and hair and tiny grasses ; and here the little round palely-spotted eggs are laid, and Jenny broods above them, her mate feeding her meanwhile, and singing to keep her courage up, until the proud day when the nestlings are hatched. Then there is no more time for sitting still, or for singing, since the clamorous family have to be fed.

And so the bright days pass, with much bustle and flitting of brown wings ; and the young ones grow apace ; and soon the songs begin again, short little cadences of joyousness, which serve as lessons for the youngsters now.

In winter the fledglings and parents cudle together for shelter under an outhouse roof. I have seen them, watched them, dancing about the rafters of a cow-house,

enjoying the warmth with that peculiar air of jauntiness by which Wren-nature expresses satisfaction with things as they are.

“Wrens, are they?” said a friend of mine when I pointed out to him the little brown things flitting in the half-light; “I took them for bats!”

It is astonishing how little some people know of that beautiful life—the old fairy-tale life—that is about us in the fields and woods and waters. Bats or Wrens—it is all the same to some blind souls. There is a knowledge that comes more through the heart than the head, and is—as Kingsley suspected—one of those secrets which God may hide from the wise and reveal to babes. Only patient and loving watchfulness can really teach us much about our Father’s plans for His wonderful creatures. But once let a man open heart and eyes, once let him stop and “consider,”

as his Lord bade him do, and I defy him not to go onwards, and long to know more and yet more; and to rejoice that, however much one may learn, there are yet infinite wonders ahead.

Dear Jenny, in her brown gown, is here, there, and everywhere in England; and all the year round one may peep at her, and get to sympathize with that busy, useful, cheery life of hers.

But the Birds of the Jewelled Robes never reach our dim skies and cold airs. It is vain to look for them in Zoological gardens, or in aviaries, however splendid and carefully kept. Their skins come; and these skins are stuffed, and kept under glass cases; but one must journey all the way to the tropics to see the true beauty of the Humming-birds.

“Jewelled” is really the right word to describe them. A negro

girl in the West Indian island of Tobago, where they swarm, wrote of them :

“The purple amethyst, the emerald’s green  
They wear, together with the ruby’s  
sheen ;  
While over all a tissue is put on  
Of golden gauze, by fairy fingers spun.”

The description—at first hand, as it were—is worth more than the rhyme, perhaps ; and it is interesting as proving things about Humming-birds, and also the love of beauty which is deep in the negro race.

Most of us would rejoice to be able to see with our own eyes the luxuriant glory of the Humming-birds’ home. I have read of it until I would fain step on board the next steamer that drops down the river, and start to see it for myself. I have gazed at the flowers, butterflies, and birds until I fancy I have gained some faint inkling of what the tropics may be. But, ah ! the

flowers are all pent under hot-house glass ; the butterflies are ranged in glass cases ; and the birds are, all of them, stuffed. My imaginings must needs come far short of the reality, although they have been, and are, an enormous pleasure to me.

It is delightful even to think of the dazzle and beauty of the palm-groves and forest-fringes, where the tiny Humming-birds seem as one of the gorgeous flowers about them. Perhaps no plumage less glittering would fit in with the blossoms, the shining leaves, and with the brilliant insects and reptiles which in those climes "feed, unhindered, in the sun." And, just as our Jenny's Brown Gown suits her surroundings, so does the Jewelled Robe chime in with the glitter and glory of the South.

There are more than three hundred species of Humming-birds, and they all live in America.

That last fact seems a little hard on other divisions of the globe until we remember the sun-birds of the Eastern tropics. They almost rival the Americans in their beauty of plumage. But the smallest of the sun-birds are twice the size of the largest of Humming-birds. Perhaps it is their marvellous minuteness, their rapid flight, their whirring wings, which buzz as do the wings of a bee—that have roused men's admiration and wonder almost as much as those feathers.

They are easily tamed, and learn to come at call, and will take honey from the hand, hovering upon their revolving wings as their long bills daintily sip the offered nectar.

They are courageous little mites, and fly in and out of their scraps of nests fearlessly even when one stands and stares at them. The nests are made, generally, of the fluffy tufts of the cotton-tree, formed

and fashioned into a rather deep cup. One species of Humming-bird —the “ruff-necked honey-sucker”—wraps its nest round and about with spiders’ webs, and fastens them into place by a natural gum secreted by glands in the mouth of the bird. Little fragments of red and yellow lichen are stuck here and there, evidently for ornament. The eggs, of the purest and most delicate whiteness, are seldom more than two in number; but, as the Humming-bird breeds all the year round, the successive pairs of nestlings count up to a pretty respectable tale of children in the end.

People who live in London do not half appreciate one of the most beautiful sights that London affords,—and that is the Natural History Museum in the Cromwell Road, South Kensington. Perhaps the word “museum” has a dull sound, and scares folk away. One remem-

bers the musty-fusty "specimens" one sees in the "naturalists'" shops; or one has vague ideas of Egyptian mummies, and incomprehensible catalogues; and museums are apt to be given a wide berth.

But that handsome building in the Cromwell Road is a sort of fairy-land. The most lively spirit could not deem it dull. Enter it, my friend, if you live in London; or if visiting there, you can plan out a leisure hour. I will be bound that going once, you will go there again, provided you are possessed of the average amount of brains and of eyesight. There, at any rate, you will gather some dim idea of what the Humming-bird may be.

Here is the nootka, a native of Mexico, a mite about two inches long. The upper parts of the body is of a clear, shining green; a large patch of topaz-like red covers the breast, bordered by a band of

snowy-white. The tail is queerly wedge-shaped, and glitters with green and chestnut and gold; and on each side of its throat comes a long outstanding tuft of lustrous feathers of a coppery-greenish gloss.

Here, too, is Gould's hummingbird, "l'oiseau-mouche," as the French call it. Its neck-ruff is formed of narrow white feathers, shining like the frost, and each one bearing an emerald spot on its tip, bordered by a darker tint.

But it is useless, quite useless, to attempt to convey by mere words the beauty of the Jewelled Robes! They were formed by the Power which beheld all that was made, and saw that it was good. They are proofs that beauty *is in itself* use: even as true use must in itself always be beautiful.

Our English Wren and the glittering "Oiseau-mouche," tiny as they both are, have their appointed place

and portion in God's great world. The Hand which hung the stars in their spheres, lovingly fashioned the delicate feathers of the Brown Gown and the radiant Robe; and if God Himself stooped to plan for the well-being of His little birds, surely we, His human children, ought to take a little time to consider and mark what He has done.

Even a feather can help us to know Him better. Even a Wren and a Humming-bird can serve to enkindle our praise.

## CHAPTER IV.

### PENGUINS.

**N**ATURE has odd ways of knotting her ropes' ends. Did ever you notice that there are animals so akin to plants that it is difficult to say to which "kingdom" they belong? That there is a flower—a moss, rather—that eats meat; that there is a mammal that is almost a fish; that there is a fish that behaves strangely like a bird; that there is a bird that lives almost the life of a fish, and possesses almost a fish's fins and scales?

(Some people there are, indeed, who go so far as to say that there

are men who act exceedingly after the manner of beasts; and beasts who might be confounded with men, had they only the gift of speech !)

To-day I am going to write of one of these strange creatures—the fish-like bird. And I would advise such of my readers who happen to be within reach of the Zoological Society's Gardens to go there on the first opportunity, and, entering the aquarium, ask the keeper to show them—not his fish, but his Penguin.

It is an odd little oily, sharp-eyed thing, and scuttles over the floor in a way that shows it was not formed for floors; nor, indeed, for any one of the conditions under which it has to exist in London.

Its true home is in the great South Pacific Ocean, where its family, and its near cousins (the King-penguins) live in enormous

flocks in the wide wastes of the trackless sea. They live literally in the ocean, spending their lives for months at a time hundreds of miles from land, and only resorting to some island or desolate shore when the breeding season is approaching, and feather-moultling time is at hand.

The captain of a Glasgow ship trading to Australia and Tasmania, gave me a wonderful account of Penguins. He cares greatly for beasts and for birds, and is a pretty close observer of their ways; and I know I can trust his eyes just as I should trust my own. And as I have only myself seen that poor little Zoological Garden Penguin, I am glad to avail myself of his experience.

They dive and swim, these fish-like birds, in the most amazing way, skipping continually in and out of the water, breasting the most

troubled seas, moving their powerful webbed feet and their fin-like wings until their bodies are propelled as fast as the fish themselves. It is even declared to be a fact that, in times of severe storm, they can dive to the bottom of the sea, where, amongst beds of coral and fields of sea-weeds, they can wander and feed in comparative quiet. Of course they have to come often to the surface for a mouthful of air; but so have whales and seals and other lung-breathing creatures.

They are very sociable, and appear to lead a merry sort of life, bravely facing hardship and danger, and slipping in and out of difficulties without "turning a feather." Perhaps their scaly feathers do not easily turn, and the dangers of the lonely and terrible seas do not seem awful to them. They may be seen sitting—standing is a better term for that attitude of theirs—on the edges

of the ice-floes, the low pale sunlight throwing their shadows over the throbbing waters, as they call to one another in their harsh, discordant voices.

They are not without a weird sort of beauty.

They have white breasts, bluish backs, with a handsome canary-coloured streak on their heads ; their strong beaks and wide feet are a reddish-brown. But if their plumage be handsome, not one word of praise can be given either to their figures or their gait. They are just as clumsy as it is possible for birds to be. They waddle, and run in jerks ; and they carry their wings hanging helplessly outward, much as a seal carries his flipper-fins—more in the manner of arms than wings.

In early spring-time, when the icy seas are warming somewhat, and the raging gales are abating in fury, the Penguins resort to their land-homes. They choose flat rocks in

a deep bay, or the more sheltered side of an island, and to these places they come year after year, generation after generation. And if the wide ocean is a loneliness, a desolation, these land-homes are exactly the opposite.

How they are crowded ! "Herrings in a barrel" is the proverbial synonym for tight placing, but the herrings lie quiet and silent in their barrel for exceeding good reasons ; the Penguins are continually scuffling and shuffling, until one would think they must themselves be deaved, to use a Scottish word, by the hubbub and commotion.

The business of rearing a family is a very serious one to everybody, but to the Penguins it is for three or four months the chief object of life. Personal comfort, daily food, likes and dislikes, are all nowhere in comparison with hatching of eggs and the training of children.

The eggs, two in number, are laid

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in a slight depression in the rock, and over them the mother bird broods until they are hatched. Should she be disturbed during this time, she will shuffle away, the precious eggs smuggled off between her thighs. She never leaves them even for a moment. The male bird goes to sea to fish for food for her. He feeds her with the most affectionate care, and with such assiduity, that she becomes enormously fat : she has, you see, so little exercise, and nothing in the world to do but to sit still, to eat the fish brought to her, and to coddle those two smooth, exquisite eggs.

But once the young birds are hatched it is a very different affair.

Both parents have to go out fishing then, for the babies have unquenchable appetites, and, slave as they may, there are always two wide-gaping mouths eager for food—until both father and mother grow

lank and attenuated, mere "rickles of bones," while their bantlings on the rocks are fat as tiny pigs.

Young Penguins take an enormous time to grow up. They keep their baby-clothes (their immature downiness) for two or three months, and all this time their parents slave for them and adore them. Suddenly they blossom out into all the glory of adult plumage: their tails extend into stiff points of rigid feathers; their wings are covered with scale-like plumes; the yellow streaks dawn upon their heads; the oily layers of dusky blue clothe their robust shoulders.

And then their education begins.

They have lived all this time on the rocks, pampered and catered for; now the time has come for them to face life in earnest.

The sea is to be henceforth their fishing-field, their play-ground, their chief abiding place.

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But the sea comes dashing savagely over the fringes of the shore, and the surf breaks for ever against the rocks.

It is enough, quite enough, to make a three-months-old Penguin nervous.

Trust themselves, and those new, shining feathers of theirs, into that white flurry of water—how is it possible?

The old birds insist not on the possibility only, but upon the necessity. They coax the trembling youngsters to the edge of a rock, and coming slyly behind them, push them over into the sea. It is worse treachery than that of any old Ramsgate bathing-woman ! One can fancy the fright, and the gasping, the hoarse screams of piteous remonstrance ; also the parent-birds' matter-of-fact way of coming to the rescue, showing how the fin-wings are to be used ; how the oar-like

feet can propel and steer ; how the briny deep should not be a terror, but a joy.

For many days the lessons continue—just a splash in the surf the first day ; half a mile of a swim the second ; then a stretch that increases every time until the young ones have learned the full use of their muscles, and are sufficiently strong to endure the full roughness of the sea. Be it remembered that, in the latitudes where the Penguins live, the Pacific Ocean is pacific only in name. Nowhere do mightier surges sweep and rise ; nowhere do the waves sink and swell in such mountainous heaps as off the terrific "Horn," and around the dreary cliffs and regions of the Antarctic Pole.

From a Penguin point of view, their land-homes at least are not dreary. Their colonies are enormous. At one place on Macquarie Island the multitude of birds in the breed-

ing season covers forty or fifty acres. Dr. Bennett, in his book on those regions, says, "The number of Penguins in spring-time is immense. It would be impossible to guess at it with any near approach to truth, as during the whole day thirty or forty thousand of them are continually landing, and an equal number going to sea. They sit quite upright in their roosting-places, and walk in an erect position until they arrive at the beach, when they throw themselves on their breasts, in order to encounter the very heavy sea which is always to be met with at their landing-places.

"They arrange themselves when on shore in as compact a manner, and in as regular ranks, as a regiment of soldiers on parade. And they class themselves in the greatest order—the sitting hens in one situation, the moulting birds in another, the young birds in a third, the 'clean' birds in

a fourth. And so strictly do all in a similar condition keep together, that should a bird that is moulting intrude itself amongst those that are 'clean,' it is immediately ejected from among them."

As I confessed, I myself, from personal observation, know nothing of Penguins, but I can easily imagine the scene Dr. Bennett describes, as I have seen our British birds, puffins and guillemots, very nearly and familiarly in their colonies in the Hebrides.

They also sit, or stand, erect on the rock-ledges; they also train and tend their nurslings; they also dive and swim, and sport in the depths of the mighty sea. But both guillemots and puffins can fly—a thing perfectly impossible to any Penguin ever hatched.

I recommended my readers to go and look at the Penguin in "the Zoo." I wish I could with reason

urge them to go and look at the puffins in the Hebrides. But Regent's Park is within the reach of so many people, and but few indeed can reach the far-away cliffs where our wild-fowl breed.

Not so very long ago there was a colony of Puffins—"sea-parrots," as the people call them—at Flamborough Head, but the persecutions of the fowlers seeking for eggs, and the thoughtless cruelty of "sportsmen," who shot them down without mercy, have driven them away. The sailors used to say they were the "Flamborough Pilots," and they declared that, in the nights when the mists hid the warning beacon fires, many a ship was saved from destruction by the cries of the bird-colony, which proclaimed to the anxious steersman how close he had come to the dangerous coast.

And now—the cliffs are silent, and the ships are wrecked!

When the Act of Parliament for the Protection of Sea-birds was passing through the House of Commons in 1870, some verses appeared in the *Times* about this very thing—verses which went far to draw attention to the stupidity, as well as the cruelty, of destroying the birds. One or two of the verses ran thus—

“ To straining eye and listening ear  
In heaven and earth no signs appear  
Whereby bewildered bark may steer.

“ But suddenly a voice is heard—  
The wailing cry of wild sea-bird—  
And all the sailor’s heart is stirred.

“ The Flamborough Pilots !’ is his cry,  
‘ Beware, beware ! The cliffs are nigh !  
Turn the ship’s head, and seaward fly !’

\* \* \* \* \*

“ The rocks with deadly echoes ring,  
With rifles that destruction bring  
To warning voice, and wafting wing.

“ Oh, cruel sound ! Oh, piteous sight !  
The gentle pilots of the night  
Are murdered in the morning light.

“And, lo ! for lack of warning call,  
Ships lost beneath the grim sea-wall  
Where now the Flamborough Pilots fall.”

Perhaps the Penguins in the far south seas also give assistance to mariners when there is for them no light on the earth or in the sky. I must ask my Glasgow captain about that. At any rate, I am certain that this “large population” of Antarctic seas has its great use in the world. It is sheer vanity in us human beings always to insist that “use” must have relation to human aims and ends. Even if the Penguin does no “piloting,” we can be quite sure that its daring and joyous life is very far from being lived in vain.

## CHAPTER V.

## THE MUSIC-MAKERS.

 ID ever it enter into your head—or, rather, into your heart—to thank God specially for the songs of the birds?

Consider for a minute how greatly the world would be saddened for us if the feathered folk went dumbly through the year. They might do their bird-businesses equally well—those birds that cannot sing fill their appointed places perfectly—but their songs rejoice us, as do the colours of the flowers; and the music comes as something extra in life, something given to us for mere delightsomeness.

To hear a Skylark singing in the sunlit air is to be made happier if one has but half an ear, but half a heart at leisure, wherewith to listen.

There is not a tired tramp on a lonely road who cannot be cheered by such music ; not a child dragging at the bloom of the buttercups but pauses, with its feet in the meadow-grass and its hands full of the meadow's gold, to gaze up at the tiny speck in the blue, from whence such rivers of melody come rippling down.

We love the birds ; we love to see them flying through our British woods, or sailing down our British seas. Let us lift a thanksgiving now and then in gratitude that some at least of them can sing.

One night in autumn I was on board a steam-yacht off the western coast of Scotland. The weather was stormy, the strong tide-currents lifted the waves in angry strife ; the

vessel held on her way, fighting down the Sound of Islay, past the peaks of Jura, within sight of the Irish shore ; and just as the day was breaking we were off the dreaded Mull of Kintyre.

All sailors know and fear the dangers that lurk there ; and anxious are the eyes that watch, and patient is the skill that waits until rocks and waves and treacherous tide-races are left behind, and the sheltered waters of the Clyde fair-way be reached in safety.

I was on deck early ; for it is a grand sight, those cliffs of the Mull at dawn. To the south was the loom of the Irish land ; to the west the dark-blue horizon, with low indigo-tinted clouds piled, like battlements above ; to the north the grim cliffs, with the fringe of racing foam snowy against their feet ; to the east the red glory of the coming day.

The salt, biting breath of the ocean was about us; the angry waves surged and swept in stinging spray along the boat's clean sides; the captain leaned watchful on the bridge; the man at the wheel bit his lips as he struggled to keep a straight course, in spite of the hurling tides.

A great silence reigned, save for the sobbing of the sea. One felt so small and mean a thing upon the sea, under the sky, bare and unsheltered, beneath the very glance of God.

Suddenly, from beyond the Kintyre cliffs, over the plunging seas, came the thrilling, cadenced notes of a Skylark's song.

Fuller and clearer it came as the bird soared higher. Sweeter and softer now, as the wind wafted the sound towards us.

"Hear to the laverocks," said the captain very low, as if to himself:

“ ‘tis for good that they be singing  
so sweet. God bless them.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The greatest of all our music-makers is the Nightingale.

The pity is that it is so talked of, so written about, and so seldom heard. But for those who know its song, and do not watch in vain for its coming in the spring, there is no singer amongst all our British birds that can approach it.

Ever since the time of Homer, poets have praised the Nightingale. From Persian rose-groves to the banks of the river Thames men have halted, spell-bound, to hearken to its wondrous song. *A moonlit night, and a nightingale sitting singing upon a hawthorn spray*—do not the very words give one a sensation of romantic delight scarcely to be outdone by any other idea?

There are some very queer things about Nightingales. For instance,

they can live and they can sing in Russia, in Sweden, even in Siberia, but they will not enter Scotland, Ireland, or Wales. And the “garden of England,” as the dwellers in Devon proudly term their county, never hears their song; and Cornwall, where mild airs and flowering shrubs might be thought of as entirely suited to their taste, is never visited.

And exactly *why* this is no naturalist can say.

Sir John Sinclair, the well-known northern agriculturist, tried many years ago to cheat them into coming to Scotland. He purchased as many eggs as he could procure, giving a large price for each one, and with infinite care he got them placed safely in robins' nests in his own county of Caithness. In due time they were hatched; and famously the redbreasts managed

to rear their foster-children. Sir John looked on, delighted. Surely, he thought, birds so kindly protected, so courteously treated, would come back next year to the place where they were bred !

But no ! In September south they flew.

And they never returned at all !

It seemed a little ungrateful. And Sir John Sinclair felt it to be so. But perhaps the birds are wiser than naturalists. Caithness is rather wild, even in summer, and trying for stronger natures than Nightingales.

It is said that the song of the bird is sweeter and more powerful in the East than in the West. In Turkey and in Greece they sing in a way no Italian bird can rival ; while Italian nightingales outsing those of France ; and French bird-fanciers consider an English bird not to be worth the trouble of

capture! As to the exact truth of this I can find no evidence; but certain it is that at Lugano, that loveliest of Italian lakes, I heard such rivers of ravishing song as surpassed anything I had supposed could come from a small bird's throat; and I considered myself pretty well versed in English bird-music. I should dearly like to go to Persia, and hear the "bulbul" amongst the roses. After that experience I could, perhaps, gauge the comparative excellence of the songs of East and West.

The note of the Nightingale is often called sad. It is not so to me. The rush of it, the lift of it, tells of anything but sadness. I can echo the words of Coleridge when he writes of

"The *merry* nightingale,  
That crowds, and hurries, and precipitates  
With fast thick warbles, his delicious notes,  
As he were fearful that an April night

Would be too short for him to utter forth  
His love-chant, and disburden his full soul  
Of all its music."

As a matter of sober fact, the song is not limited to the hours of night. When the hen-bird is brooding upon her eggs, her mate sits by and sings—and sings, and sings—until one marvels when may come the hour in which he rests and sleeps. Perhaps it may be that between ten o'clock in the morning until three o'clock in the afternoon the stream of melody may grow faint and occasional. But even during those hours I have heard the Italian Nightingales piping as loud and clear as though they had not been singing also throughout the livelong night.

But to come to more ordinary, and, perhaps, satisfactory songsters, the dear familiar Thrushes and Black-birds have no cranks about climates, nor fancies as to longitudes. They

are everywhere, and with us always. From the stormy shores of the Hebrides to the Cornish combes and the Irish dargles one may hear their full rich notes; and their voices are so deeply clearly sweet that one need not greatly regret the vagaries of their absent rival.

One's own memory can call up the song of the Thrushes and the Blackbirds better than any printed words, and there is small need for me to write of their music here. The Linnets, too: the dear familiar friends, who sit in cosy companies on the branches of the hedgerow-trees, while their song rings forth as though the boughs were hung with fairy bells, breeze-shaken—there is no need to write of Linnets.

But there is need for us each to listen, to “take heed,” as the old Saxon word is. We are, all of us, too apt to go thanklessly and blindly on our way, yearning, it

may be, for various unattainable joys, while we disregard the exquisite cup of pleasure which is held out for our acceptance. So blind are we, and deaf sometimes, and dumb!

Perhaps in mid-winter we do spare a moment to listen to the Robin's song, to the Owl hooting in the twilight, to the wild notes of the Redwing coming across the frost. But the music of the feathered folk that is with us from March until July we take for too much as a mere matter of course; just as we are apt to take the sunshine of summer, and the whiteness of spring daisies in the grass. But let us once mark the individuality of the wild-birds' notes, once train the eye and ear to catch their infinite variety—then few pleasures can be dearer or purer than those which the birds will render unto our hearts.

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Do you know the little White-throat—the gay little migrant that comes to us in May? He is certainly no great songster, but he “fancies himself” immensely; and his failures are the most entertaining things in the world!

All day long, when his mate is brooding over their nest in the thorn-bush, he may be seen perched on the outermost twigs, and with crest erect and puffed-out throat, keeping up a harsh chattering by way of a song. Now and then he starts ambitiously into the air, and tries to rival the Finches, who are gay about him; their clear notes seem to sting him to aggravation. He, too, *will* sing! Up he flies, screeching as though his tiny throat must burst.

But it is no use. Suddenly he becomes aware that mere noise is not music, and he comes whirling back to the very twig whence he

mounted, his crest depressed, his voice broken, his wings drooped; then he creeps to the side of his bright-eyed wife, and sits in dudgeon for a while, until some new carol from the birds about him lashes him into fresh endeavour.

I wonder whether in your country wanderings you have ever chanced on a Water-ouzel? And, if so, I wonder, further, if you have ever heard it sing?

A more charming bird, a sweeter song, it would be difficult to find. This morning—it is September when I write, and I am staying in the beautiful nooks and folds of the Pentland hills—this morning a pair of them flew past me as I stood by the burn that feeds the Glencorse reservoir. I was not thinking of birds, nor of the great city which the reservoir helps to refresh, but of the historic interests of the place—the relics of the Covenanters, the

marks on the heather yonder, where, it is said, the outlines of their camp can yet be traced on the field of Rullion Green.

Then flitting by me came the water-ouzels. They alighted just above : he on a stone in mid-water, she on a tussock of grass at the edge. There they faced each other, making quick little bobs and bows, and patterning over the half-submerged stones.

Presently he, with a flourish, went overhead in the burn, and regained his stone with a jerky little bow to his mate, as though to say, "What, now, do you think of that ?"

She bobbed back her admiration ; but it possibly was not warm enough to satisfy him, for again he left his stone and began the quickest and most daring manœuvres. He dived, he swam, he dipped. One moment he charged the stream just where it broke in a miniature waterfall, letting

the foam come in smothering masses over his head. The next minute I caught sight of him higher up the stream, crossing a pool of comparatively smooth water, keeping well below the surface, his quick snatching movements alone betraying his whereabouts; his admiring mate waiting the end of the performance, with her pretty sleek head on one side, and her white breast reflected in the water.

Presently he rose in the air, and she flew to meet him, their wings touching and parting as they gambolled together like a pair of butterflies. Then, tired at last, he returned to his stone and began his song.

The fine clear notes rang out above the ripple of the rushing water, mingling with it in a manner positively ravishing. The song of the Water-ouzel is no snatch of broken melody, but a full sustained song, most true and pure and sweet.

Heard there in the solitudes of the Pentlands, it struck me as doubly beautiful.

But there is not a county in England, not a mountain-range in Scotland, not a stretch of moor in Ireland, that has not some beauty special to itself—some plant or insect, some form of hill or dale, some sweep of lush meadow-land, or (as it most concerns us now to notice) some bird which may be said to belong just specially there.

Even Londoners are not quite defrauded of song-birds. There are Wood-pigeons in Kensington Gardens ; and Chaffinches in St. James's Park ; and Robins—any number of them ! And there are Thrushes and half a dozen other singers in the Regent's Park and the other tree-planted places of the town. So every one may open their ears to be gladdened, every one may

open their eyes to be pleased, if only they choose to be cheered by the sight and sound of the feathered folk !

In the days of my childhood, a book entitled "Parables from Nature" was one of my dearest delights. In its pages the dumb creatures, and even things inanimate, were made to talk in fascinating ways, and brought many a lesson home to my heart.

But I am not sure if the meaning of parables should always be written out at length, or that "morals" should always be fastened on to the end of tales.

Certainly I am not going to write a moral here. The bird-music is quite eloquent enough to speak for itself. And it is so simple, too, that even a child can comprehend its cheeriness, its bravery, and its love.

So I leave you to listen for your-

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selves. And, having listened, you are certain sure to be able to answer "yes" if the question should come to you again—"Did ever you thank God for the songs of the birds?"

## CHAPTER VI.

## CLIFF-BIRDS, AND THEIR COLONIES.



BOUT forty miles from the western coast of Scotland lies the island of Canna.

It is one of the Smaller Hebrides. Very few people know of it; still fewer people go there. One or two yachts seek shelter in its harbour; one or two steamers touch at its pier for the barrels of salt herrings which the fishermen have piled ready for the southern markets; a few visitors to the Laird's house come in the summer-time.

And that is all—as far as humans go.

But for the Cliff-birds it is a sort

of metropolis: a vastly important and populous place, ranking, in their opinion, far before such desolate and wholly inconvenient spots as London or Edinburgh or Liverpool. The estuaries of the Thames or the Forth or the Mersey may do very well for the haunts of unfeathered bipeds; but the "Feathered Folk," the lords of the air and the earth and the sea—the Cliff-birds—THEY prefer Canna.

To the north of the island the cliffs of black basalt rise sheer out of the water for some six hundred feet; towards the east and south they trend brokenly away into long reefs of rock, running far into the water, and they cease altogether at one point, where the white sand of a bay is spread.

In late autumn, winter, and early spring, these cliffs are a dreary solitude.

Down below, at the edge of the

tide, a Cormorant may stand on the rocks, gorged after its fishing ; or some Gulls may shelter from the storm in an angle of the huge basalt wall ; or an Oyster-catcher may run pattering over the strip of wet shingle that lies in the bend of the bay. A Falcon may wheel aloft, on the outlook for a rabbit ; or a company of Starlings scurry shrieking into crannies of the rock.

But in so wide and stern a place all these count as nothing ; and the violence and desolation comes to one's eye and ear as an almost unbroken solitude.

It is in late spring and in summer one finds the cliff population at home.

Then the scene is strangely different. The rocks, the high cliffs, the whole shore is alive with birds. The air is thronged with hurrying wings. The blue waters are dotted and dimpled by thousands of

Gulls, Gannets, Puffins, Guillemots, Cormorants, and Ducks. It is the breeding season, the season of business, pleasure, hurry, and work ; and there is little left of silence or loneliness in Canna.

The folk of the cliffs have their own notions of rights and wrongs ; their own courtesies and—alas !—treacheries ; their own laws, which, like those of the Medes and Persians, alter not.

Upon the flat grass-grown top of a detached “stack” rock, with a vast chasm between it and the island, the black-backed Gulls build. A hundred feet away, on the sheer face of the precipice, the Kittiwakes have their colony. Where the basalt is broken into crumbling slopes, the Puffins make their burrows amongst the thrifts and the sea-grasses.

The Eider-ducks claim as their share the smooth round boulders

which lie above high-water mark on the pebble beach.

The Shags, or green Cormorants, make the short turf horrible by their untidy domestic habits, and pile their rancid fish, and heap half-digested bones about their nests in a way that only Cormorants could put up with.

The black Guillemots breed in holes under the rocks very little above the water-mark, and there their little mottled-grey babies grow that varied feathering which persuades many quite wise humans into thinking that in the young black Guillemots they have discovered some quite unknown or hitherto undescribed species of fowl.

And all about—above, below, upon either side—there is a riot of cries: the wild “laugh” of the Great Gulls, and the mournful, almost articulate cry of the Kittiwakes—“Kittiway-o-oo”—being heard above the rest.

A poor human person, standing there in all the turmoil, is half deafened and wholly bewildered. But if he be wise he will sit still on the nearest stone, and, as motionless as may be, gaze at the nesting ways of the cliff-people.

They are fearless enough, these wild, free creatures: all save the Cormorants, whose snake-like necks crane anxiously about, and whose fierce eyes watch the intruder with a frightened hatred unpleasant to see. But the Kittiwakes sit on their eggs within four feet of one, looking like innocent doves as they calmly brood and wait. And the Terns skim by on their swallow-like wings, turning their graceful heads as if making one welcome to a share in their proud joy over the animated tufts of grey down that were hatched out of the eggs not twelve hours agone.

There, on the steep slope opposite

to one's vantage-ground on the cliff, is a colony of Puffins.

Sailors call them Tom Noddies, and gazing at them now it is easy to guess why. There they sit, whole ranks and regiments of them, bolt upright, becking and bowing as though moved by springs. Their enormous bills point vertically over their little smooth waistcoats, their bead-like eyes glisten, and they keep on, every mother's chick of them, gravely nod-nod-nodding, like so many porcelain Chinese mandarins.

Each pair of Puffins has but one youngster (can it be the position of only child that help the creature to be so preternaturally grave?), but they fuss over their single hope and pride in a way that must surprise the Eider-ducks, who take care of their families of twelve or fourteen in the calmest and most leisurely manner. The grotesque little Puffins do nothing calmly; and as

for leisure, they haven't an idea what it means.

They fly heavily, but quickly, their short wings working round like a mill. They swim and dive in an amazing way—indeed, they accomplish every duty of their lives with an energy and a dash that would go far to wear any other species of bird to tatters.

They are pugnacious, too ; and I have been told by the cragsmen in Canada of their having fought with, and slain, such Guillemots or Razor-bills who have dared, contrary to cliff-law, to invade their territories.

Puffins make burrows some three feet deep, curved and angled in a way that makes it a difficult job for a man to get at an egg or a young one. A terrier dog belonging to a friend of mine had something the nature of the Puffins themselves—as far as being a busybody goes—and he loved nothing better than to

have a chance of exploring these burrows.

I don't think he did the birds any harm—at least, I never saw him injure one bodily—but he must have been an awful trial to Puffin nerves.

He would dash into holes, and after sundry subterranean sounds of groaning and scuffling, would come racing out again a yard or two from where he had entered, with half a dozen birds dangling about him. No Puffin, once aroused to anger, ever thinks of quitting its hold, and it was an absurd sight to see that shaggy-coated Syke enjoying the fun of rolling himself free.

But what was fun to him could scarcely have been enjoyment to the Puffins; so he was rarely allowed to go near the cliffs at breeding times.

The multitude of birds at Canna outnumbers all calculation. At sunset, when the day's fishing is over, and the parents have come to rest

beside their nests, every available spot of perching ground is occupied—and this for the distance of a mile or two. If startled by a gun-shot (a very rare occurrence, for the laird of Canna shows the kindest courtesy to his feathered tenants), they will rise in a cloud so dense as to darken the sky, and, with a clamour that is deafening, they will come beating about the head of the spectator as if wholly regardless of his presence: one might almost touch them with the outstretched hand as they sweep past.

It is late in the summer, when the nestlings are all fledged and able to shift for themselves, that peace again descends upon the cliffs.

In the quiet of some creek, where the grey basalt pillars rise in serried rows out of the throbbing water, one may see a family of Sheldrakes paddling slowly about, the showy plumage of the drake—black, white,

and chestnut-red—shining in the light as he sails round his mate and children, as if on guard. It is the prettiest sight—the little buoyant balls of feathers ; the watchful mother making her low gurgling sounds of motherly counsel and instruction ; and the father, his gay plumes all out-preened, the picture of proud contentment.

Beyond, where the reef lies off the mouth of the harbour, the Gannets are fishing, falling like stones in the blue water, and sending up fountains of spray some feet into the air. These Gannets are angular, awkward birds, and go flapping one by one over the sea, scanning the waves with hungry eyes for fish near enough to the surface to be struck by their plunging fall. Round those fierce eyes of theirs they have curious dark rings, which show sharply on their pure white plumage, and have earned them the name of “spectacled

geese." "Solan geese," they are also called; but they are not geese at all, being rather allied to the Pelicans, or to that very dissimilar bird the Cormorant.

Beyond the scarp of the North Cliff in Canna there is a gorge, which sinks away into pasture-ground, where a brook—or, as we say in Scotland, a "burn"—comes trickling through the grasses to the shore. Here a pair or two of Teal have established themselves.

These graceful little birds, with their vivid green wing-feathers, are perhaps the prettiest of all our British ducks. They have not the handsome patches of the Sheldrake, nor the glorious neck of the Red-throated diver, but their delicate plumage and finely-shaped bodies distinguish them from all the rest.

Once I, by accident, disturbed one of their nests. It was in a tuft of dry grass, well beyond all danger

of overflow in a sudden freshet of the burn. It was lined with a profusion of down and feathers, and in the centre was a compact ball of more down, queerly mottled and marked. The mother bird was away. I stooped to examine more closely ; I even attempted to handle that odd-looking ball in the middle, when, with a sudden jerk that made me start, the mottled thing broke up into a brood of tiny teals, which fled headlong into the water, and utterly disappeared.

The stream widened just here into a miniature lake, and in it the creatures, by some mysterious means, remained hidden as long as I stayed on the bank. Not a glimpse of a head, not a point of a bill was to be seen, not a ripple on the water. No sound nor sign of the scuttling company that had vanished into it in such surprising style ! I suppose they had dived into the pool, swam

to the other side, and put up their small beaks against the bank or the grasses, and so lay *perdu* until the coast was clear, and I taken my alarming self away. But I must say the thing was cleverly managed. No conjurer could have done the trick more neatly.

Perhaps I ought not to write here about Teals, for they are not cliff-birds, even in the sense that Eider-ducks are. They love marshy land, and haunt fresh-water lakes close to the sea ; they gather about the oozy shores of Uist and the Outer Hebrides, and it is only very occasionally they come to breed in Canna.

It is difficult to curb one's pen when one is writing of birds, the subject is so full of charming things. But, perhaps, mere descriptions of plumage is apt to be dull reading, so I have abstained from attempting that sort of thing here. Yet I hope

my readers may be fortunate enough to witness for themselves such a bird-metropolis as Canna, and then I am certain they will hunt up any volumes that treat scientifically of the names and habits of the cliff people ; for they will be interested to get information that will help them to recognize Puffins, or Gannets, or Oyster-catchers ; and to know the difference between the lovely Terns and their cousins, the Kittiwakes.

There is no keener pleasure than to find some rare and beautiful visitor, such as the Ivory Gull, or the Rosy Tern, and to make one's self "positive sure" that one's inexperience has not deceived one. Certainly all our lives, my brothers and I, have found sources of delight in books which have helped us to know birds better. Morris's "British Birds" (three bulky volumes) was a great assistance ; while a book which I loved in my childhood,

and cherish to this day—Stanley's “Book of Birds,”—is thumbed almost to illegibility. In these days of libraries and cheap literature it is easy enough to study ornithology, if one cares to do so; and there may be better authorities now than either of my dear old friends.

What I am at in this tiny book of mine is not so much to *tell* about birds, but to rouse a love for the beautiful creatures which can help us to do our own work in the world more happily and more gratefully. For that is one of the uses of the dumb creatures—did you know?

There are a score of places where one can see the delightful sight of a cliff-colony besides the Island of Canna. It is by no means necessary to go all the way to the Hebrides to behold the cliff-birds at home.

I once saw a magnificent colony,

which was not on a cliff at all! but on a wide moorland, not far from Fleetwood, in Lancashire. There were Gulls there, any amount of them, and of several sorts.

But, to confess the truth, I think, somehow, that the beautiful birds look more beautiful in such a wild and romantic scene as the great sea walls of our British shores. And the Lancashire moss notwithstanding, Gulls must always be in my mind true and dear “cliff-people.”

## CHAPTER VII.

### THE CITY BIRD, AND HIS COUNTRY COUSIN.

 HERE the huge iron girders of St. Pancras Railway Station support a roof that covers many acres of ground, men and women are apt to look like pygmies on the platforms, viewed from above. Trains glide in and out upon the lines of rails, half a dozen of them at once, like strings of long-shaped beads. Volumes of sound rise and break against the roof, and echo to and fro.

It is a strange and fearful place—viewed from a Pigeon's point of view, high in the rafters.

And there are always Pigeons in St. Pancras Station. Not the happy home-dwelling birds that one sees, fat and placid, picking grain from amongst the cab-horses' feet in the City, or in Palace Square at Westminster, but terrified and most miserable birds, perching disconsolate there aloft, or beating with weary wings against that big arch of glass, which is so dusty and so cruelly great.

They have had a spoiled and pampered life, hitherto, these poor hungry and bewildered Pigeons ; for they are "carriers" or "homing" birds, and have been carefully reared and tended (in Yorkshire or Derbyshire most likely), by men who "fly" them for sport or for gain. It is the habit of these men to take the young birds in baskets a mile or two from home, and throw them into the air, that they may learn their way back to their dove-cot.

Gradually the distance is increased; the mile or two becomes scores of miles. The covered baskets go long journeys by rail, many to St. Pancras, which is the terminus of the Midland line; and there the men, more intent on their sport than on the characteristics of the place, let loose their birds as soon as they arrive.

It is Pigeon nature to beat about for a while before settling into straight, homeward flight, and so a large number of birds turn into the great cavernous glass building, and failing to find a direct way out, remain there until hunger and bewilderment have caused them to forget all about that snug cot in the country where they were born and bred.

I do not like the look of "Pigeon-fancying" men. I do not believe they have an atom of real love for the pretty innocent birds

which they use as a means of gain (or loss!). Betting money upon the comparative speed of pairs of wings is a degradation. One can see traces of the degradation in the men's faces. They begin the "sport" as mere boys, and it gains so tight a hold on them that they can no more get clear of it than can the poor birds they have brought to town get clear of the station's arch of dusky glass.

It is not pleasant to think of them. And there are so many delightful things connected with Pigeons to talk of, that we will step outside St. Pancras—after flinging the crumbs from our luncheon-baskets on the ground, on the chance that they may comfort some of the poor victims of men's thoughtless selfishness—and betake ourselves to places where the town-bred birds are tame enough to allow us to come within friendly distance.

There is scarcely a large building in London which has not its haunting Pigeons.

Londoners like to see them. Even the street-arabs and the message-boys refrain from "shying" at creatures that are so sturdily trustful, so daintily sure of their right to their own place in the world.

It is sometimes difficult to determine the colour of London Pigeons. They live amid such soot and grime, that their delicate plumage gets grimy, too, by contact. Besides, these "Pigeon-fanciers" carefully rear varieties—black, and white, copper-coloured, and pied; and the birds, recruited as they are from all parts of the country, get sorely mixed.

But the prevailing hues are various shades of grey and blue, merging off into purple on the one hand, and into white on the other.

They have perfectly lovely metallic reflections, especially on their necks, which their full smooth feathering defies even London soot to wholly spoil.

One day I had been waiting in offices, and doing sundry businesses in the old street called Paternoster Row, and feeling a bit weary, I turned for a rest into the narrow plot of garden ground that surrounds the east end of St. Paul's Cathedral.

There are many seats there, and beds of gay (if somewhat smoke-bedimmed) flowers. Numbers of people come there—poor, and working people mostly: it is pleasant to find a spot for rest, and a flower to look upon amidst the gigantic tide of bustle and toil that flows for ever, in daylight hours, in the City streets.

As I sat there I noticed a lad in a kind of go-cart. A girl, a sister evidently, had brought him from the Cornhill corner carefully enough,

and had wheeled him on to the asphalte path, where he could sit and stare at the flowers.

She herself, a rough-headed, bright-eyed lassie, darted off to play at some mysterious girlish game with half a dozen kindred souls.

He sat quietly enough, but I noticed that he leaned back as far as possible in his awkward little chair, scanning the towering plinths and pillars above him with eager eyes. His was a pale little face, and bore the deeply-lined marks of disease and of pain. I saw the next minute that the unequal shoulders and helpless limbs were those of a cripple.

Presently, with that soft sound of "winnowing" wings that is so pleasant to hear, a Pigeon flew down to him, perching on his eagerly outstretched arm without an instant's hesitation.

They were old friends, dear friends ; so much it was easy to see.

The bird tramped up and down the shabby jacket-sleeve with that proud strutting step which is specially reserved for moments of intensest Pigeon-pleasure. It was cooing meanwhile, uttering those deep-throated murmurs that express love better than any other sounds save words from human lips.

“Sometimes I bring her bread,” the lad said—he had glanced up and met my sympathizing glances ; “but to-day I didn’t know we were a-coming to St. Paul’s, and I didn’t save her a bit of my breakfast. You see, Laura, there, chooses generally to go to the Temple Gardens.”

“And you have to go where Laura likes ?”

“She’s good to me, is Laura,” he answered quickly. “And she don’t care for my bird here as *I* care.

Of course she don't. How should she?"

"How did you make friends with the Pigeon?" I asked.

He stroked the sleek little head soberly for a while before he answered.

"I was one day—the pain was sore—I was sitting here all alone—"

"Yes?"

"Perhaps I was crying, kind of moaning, anyway; and Laura was out of sight, and I was wanting bad to get off home. Then she came down to my shoulder, she did, my pretty, pretty bird! and she moaned too,—it's true she did, like as though she were sorry . . . and her soft head came against my cheek, rubbing up quite fearless. I had some bread that day, for father'd gone to Chatham, and we were to stay out all day, and had taken our dinners with us. And

my bird—I call her always ‘my bird’—she ate from my hand, as though she’d known me always. We’ve been kind of friends ever since.”

Just then the long wings were expanded, and the Pigeon flew off in circles, striking the air with her resounding pinions as she wheeled, and rose, and stooped, and rose again, until finally she disappeared behind the angles of the great cathedral.

“She will come again; oh yes!” the boy murmured. And, eh, but it *must* be fine to go like that!”

I looked at the helpless little body. Others with far less reason have longed, as he was longing, for “the wings of a Dove.” But there was more of pleasure than of pain on the white pinched face just then.

Our Father, of Whose gift are the birds of the air, makes the simplest things His messengers of

good and of comfort. Certainly He had stooped to remember this poor crippled waif, and had sent him now a little spring of loving pleasantness, a glimpse of freedom and beauty by means of a city Dove.

And that small well-spring has swelled into a larger river than I had imagined then, both for himself and Laura—and, perhaps, for me.

A friend of mine, living in a Midland valley, possessing a fine house, lovely children, gardens, horses—most things that go to make up the outside joys of life—bethinks herself of the London poor, who are pent always under the pall of London smoke, bounded always about by the vastness of the town.

And she has prepared a cottage just outside her gates—a sweet cottage, about which honeysuckles grow, and where hollyhocks stand tall against the hedge—and here she entertains four or five children

at a time—"visitors from London." A matron looks after them, a village girl comes to sweep and wash; and they themselves are only too proud to help in the house and the garden—such a palace of a house, such a paradise of a garden—as it seems to them!

I happened to speak to this friend of mine of the boy and his bird that I had seen in St. Paul's Churchyard, and it was not long before she had sought him out, and invited him and his sister down for a fortnight's country air.

And so it came to pass that I beheld him again, with just the same crippled limbs, in just the same ramshackle little cart, but with a tinge of pink coming faintly on the pallid face, and a look of almost awed delight shining in his eyes.

They had drawn him along the road to a place where a stream ran

under a bridge, and magnificent chestnut trees threw cool shadows over nodding foxgloves and green nests of ferns. There he sat, alone, for Laura and the rest had followed a path too rough for him; but if *alone*, he certainly was not *lonely*.

His face was radiant when I caught sight of it.

I halted by him, taking my seat on a tree-root. Something of his great pleasure was coming into my own heart.

It is good in these days of universal questionings about all things beneath and above the sun, to enter sometimes into the peace and silence that remains under the forest trees, amongst the wayside flowers.

Presently there was a sound of rushing wings, and a large bird lighted on a bough just across the stream, full in our view. It was a Wood-pigeon.

Never shall I forget the lad's joy

as he caught sight of it, and heard its note. The tears rushed, blinding, into his eyes.

“This also!” he muttered to himself more than to me. “The flowers, the sky, the trees, the river, **AND A PIGEON!**”

Perhaps it was the one thing he had missed and regretted. Perhaps that soft cooing call was needful to complete for him the fulness of beauty in this sweet country-world. I looked at him, and kept silence.

“Do you think my bird will remember me when I get back?” demanded he, after a while.

Certainly I thought so, and said so. A fortnight is not so very long a time, after all. And then we fell to speaking generally of Pigeons. One does come down from feelings to facts rather suddenly, sometimes.

I told him that that handsome bird yonder was the largest and handsomest of English wild Pigeons.

The country folk call it the Cushat Dove, from its cooing voice; or the Ring-dove, because of the broken collar of white-tipped feathers which partly encircles the changeful glory of its neck.

Then we talked of the Blue rock, the hardy, fleet-winged Pigeon that dwells in the sea-caves of our English coasts: smaller than the Wood-pigeon, smaller even than his own gentle friend of the London square; but wilder, far, as one would expect from a creature spending its life on the wild sea-coast.

I tried to picture to him the home of the Rock dove,—a cave, with cool white shell-sand at its threshold, and with no floor at all, save the sparkling ripples of the sheltered sea. Or, perhaps, a darker, loftier grotto, where the Atlantic surges beat and roar, filled with a gloom impenetrable, save where the innocent birds flash in and out on

their silver wings—emblems of the peace that can brood even on the bosom of the troubled sea.

Maybe he did not understand much of my picturing. How could my poor words point for him the mightiness and the wonder of the deep?

It was easier to talk of the Ring dove and her haunts. To point out to him the thick large layers, where her nest was swinging in the wind; to tell of her curious power of nourishing her young with food prepared in her own crop; to bid him listen to the rushing of her powerful wings as she flew off to her feeding-grounds, where the clover-fields edged down towards the patch of ripening peas.

Pigeons are great appreciators of peas! They eat grain of all kinds, the young shoots of grass, turnips, or any sort of green crop. In autumn, acorns and beech-mast

prove abundant dainties, and in winter the hedgerow berries and the roots of weeds and grasses do not come amiss. They are thorough British birds, and Britain “spreads a table” for them all round through the year.

The farmers look askance now and again ; for during winter they collect in mighty flocks, which do great damage to the winter wheat. But, on the whole, the people are proud of the Doves, and smile to themselves as they hear the soft murmur of their call coming from rock or tree.

From earliest ages the Dove has been the emblem of innocence. The gentle head, the large melting eye, the tender notes of its voice, all mark it out as the most loving and most guileless of birds. Some folks say it has its own black faults, and hint at dark stories of quarrel and struggle ; but then there are always

some folks to tell dark stories about everything.

My London lad and I, sitting under the chestnuts, and watching the Ring-dove in the larch, believed nothing, except that Pigeons were the most delightful of birds; and I think both he and I, in our dim, human way, were drawn nearer to Him who clothed the Dove "with silver wings, and made her feathers like gold."





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